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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a commentary on the Report of the Commission on English published in 1965, "Freedom and Discipline in English." In particular, inconsistencies between the Commission's Recommendation 13, calling for a clearly defined sequence of study from grade to grade, and other statements apparently contradicting this sequential structure are indicated. Further, difficulties in the Commission's interpretation of Alfred North Whitehead's concept of three stages of growth (freedom, discipline, freedom) and the attainment of freedom through discipline are discussed. Finally, the author suggests that the teacher's main tasks and functions are best defined when the student is in the second or discipline stage described by Whitehead, that is, the mastering of the tools and skills appropriate to the realization of the higher level of freedom. (TO)

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FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE REVISITED

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Freedom and Discipline in English, subtitled Report of the Commission on English, was published nine years ago this spring. It was the culmination of a five-year study by a 16-member body made up mainly of college professors, but also including a few teachers from the secondary level, and one member -- ex officio -- representing the College Entrance Examination Board, the organization mainly sponsoring the Commission's work. As might be expected, the Commission was specially interested in college-bound students; nevertheless, its efforts were intended to influence all tracks and levels.

The following passage from the "Foreword" suggests the context of the Commission's endeavors, and also expresses its aspirations for the report.

> The report should be viewed as a part of the curricular reform that began in the early 1950's and has swept over the schools. It should take its place with comparable reports in other subjects, particularly in mathematics, the sciences, and foreign languages. We hope that the acceptance of the Commission's report will equal that given earlier reports in other fields, and that the response, in the form of effective changes in the classrooms, will be equally dramatic.

In general, the Commission -- perceiving that the English discipline was in danger of losing its identity by attempting to cover everything from formal logic to teen-age problems -- sought to redefine English in its most essential form, and then, in the light of this basic definition, to explore implications for the classroom in the reciprocally related areas of language, literature, and composition.

In seeking to define the essence of the English discipline, the Commission concluded "that language, primarily the English language, constitutes the core of the subject; and . . . that the study and use of the English language is the proper content of the English curriculum." The Commission referred to these

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conclusions as "unstartling," "simple and obvious," but defended them on the ground that "the perusal of scores of school curriculums has convinced the Commission that a simple answer is needed at the present time." The Commission warned against "ephemeral influences," and observed that "The English curriculum in the average secondary school today is an unhappy combination of old matter unrenewed and new matter that rarely rises above the level of passing concerns."

The Commission realized, of course, that the problems could not be solved merely by formulating a restrictive definition of the English discipline. Consequently, the report presents 14 specific recommendations concerning teacher preparation, teaching conditions, and the English curriculum. For example: certification requirements should include a minimum of two semester courses in American literature and four in English literature; temporary certificates should be valid for only one year; the English teacher should be assigned no more than four classes a day, and the average class size should be no more than 25 pupils. The three final recommendations, on curriculum, are broadest in scope and have the most enduring significance for the profession. Recommendation 12 calls for the exclusion of all matters not clearly related to English as defined. Recommendation 13 calls for "a clearly defined sequence of study from grade to grade." And recommendation 14, a sort of corollary to the preceding one, is "That significant data of students' performance . . . be accumulated in individual folders and passed on from year to year to successive English teachers."

Chapter Four, on composition, is 26 pages long, so a detailed account of it is out of the question. I should like, rather, to consider what might be called the philosophical heart of the matter, for it is in this chapter that the meaning of the title, Freedom and Discipline, is most fully developed.

The source is Alfred North Whitehead's essay entitled, "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline," but another Whitehead essay, "The Rhythm of Education," also provides some of the substance of the discussion. In brief, Whitehead postulated three stages of growth from infancy to adulthood, each stage exhibiting characteristics peculiarly its own. The following passage shows how the Commission applied Whitehead's concepts to the teaching of composition:

> In composition the early years might concentrate on what, in the best sense, is creative writing -- not writing aimed to create artistic forms or works of art, but writing aimed primarily at expression, at discovery of the self and the world. The next stage might concentrate on the discipline of form -- on those matters of arrangement, logic, and conventional correctness that make up the body of most books on composition. And in the third stage, which in Whitehead's cycle is a return to freedom, teachers might promote the comprehensive view of composition which combines the pleasure and freedom of the first with the instruction and discipline of the second. This third stage should witness the development of style, as the first stage witnesses the development of invention, and the second of methods of arrangement and form.

That is a very clear, though generalized, statement which might have served as the basis for the realization of the Commission's Recommendation 13, which called for "a clearly defined sequence of study from grade to grade." Taken seriously, it might also have served to guide and productively shape the emphasis on creativity which received much of its impetus from the Dartmouth Seminar, held a little over a year after publication of the Commission's report. One cannot help but wonder, however, how seriously the Commission itself took what was, ostensibly, the conceptual basis of its report to the profession.

Certainly, the report does not present a coherent working out of the implications of the concept. Indeed, on specific points, the Commission took some strong stands which do not seem to fit very well into its own interpretation of Whitehead's theory. For instance: "Even the most cursory reading should be accompanied by the marking of errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar,

and diction." Even in the first stage? Even when writing is "aimed primarily at expression, at discovery of the self and the world"?

More serious points of confusion are apparent. For instance, it turns out that the Commission did not take Whitehead's theory seriously enough to preserve one of its essential features. Whitehead specifically identified certain periods of growth during which one or the other of the stages of development will be taking place. In light of that fact, the following passage from the report is confusing, to say the least:

> These three "stages" in the teaching of composition are not, however, simply the stages of junior high, senior high, and college, though they are that in part. They are the stages of every cycle of instruction in composition. In every year -- in ninth grade English, in eleventh grade English, in college freshman English -- teachers may experience the same cycle of freedom, discipline, and freedom -- with the final freedom vastly different from the initial one.

In reference to the above passage, it is, first of all, odd -- isn't it? -- that it is teachers, not students, who may experience the cycle; but perhaps this is simply a slip which escaped the editor's attention. Secondly, and more seriously, the Commission seems to have recommended a sequential curriculum and advocated a spiral one. Perhaps the two are not, strictly speaking, incompatible. Nevertheless, the absence of clarification on this point left ample room for composition teachers to keep on muddling around in the same old way.

One other point of confusion is worth pointing out. Suppose we grant that freedom, discipline, and freedom are, indeed, the stages of every cycle of instruction in composition. Presumably, then, in the initial stage of freedom the student -- let's say he's a twelfth-grader -- would be free to write whatever he pleased -- a poem, perhaps, or a play. The report does not suggest to us how long this initial stage of freedom should last -- but it does

clearly suggest that at some point it will have to be brought to a screeching halt, because "During the eleventh and twelfth grades, at least, the expository essay should be the staple of the course."

In the summer of 1965, I directed one of the hundred-odd English institutes first supported that year under Title XI of the National Defense Education Act; and in the summer of 1969, I directed a second institute supported by the provisions of the Educational Professions Development Act. Also, following my own institute in 1965, I joined a group of a hundred or so other actual or prospective institute directors who gathered in Boston for two weeks to share experiences and shape policy. I think it is fair to say that the Boston meeting -- a disaster in many respects -- was heavily dominated by persons who had also been actively associated with the Commission. In any case, I cite these details in order to provide you with the personal context of my closing remarks.

The Commission on English was undoubtedly enormously influential in persuading the government to include English among the federally sponsorable disciplines. Furthermore, the Commission itself had provided incalculably valuable resource material by conducting institutes in 20 host universities in the summer of 1962. These 1962 institutes "were preceded by a Planning Institute in 1961 at which all who were to teach in the 1962 institutes made a common curriculum," and were followed by a Second Planning Institute, in 1963, at which "40 of the most promising participants in the 1962 institutes" were set to examining "critically the workshop program of the 1962 institutes" with a view to improving it.

Through these activities in the early '60's the Commission did, I think, have an important and lasting impact on the profession. The Commission's institutes drew hundreds of teachers and professors into a common search for ways

and means of improving the discipline. Ultimately, under federal sponsorship, the endeavor involved literally thousands. Out of such a massive effort many good things were bound to come.

And yet, the very thing which could have held all this activity together, giving it maximum focus and permanence, was sadly lacking. I mean, of course, the report itself. The trouble is that it lacks a conceptual center from which long-range guidelines could be coherently derived. In a word, the implications of Whitehead's concepts were simply badly thought out.

Within a year-and-a-half after the report was published, the Dartmouth Seminar blew us far off in the direction of freedom. Promptly, too, new concerns which the Commission had only caught glimpses of -- the legitimate concerns of the culturally disadvantaged, to name but one -- loomed larger in our thinking than did the needs of the college bound. Freedom and Discipline simply did not contain anything solid and lasting enough to survive the winds of change.

Gladys Veidemanis, from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in her keynote address to a recent Conference of Secondary School English Department Chairmen, listed humorously five maladies common to English teachers. Among these she named "chronic pendulumitis" -- the sensation of being perpetually alternated between polar extremes: today, freedom -- tomorrow, discipline. I think the only medicine for the disease is a better, clearer, more workable understanding of the relation between the two.

It is not a question of freedom and discipline. In Whitehead's sense, the second stage of freedom is attained through discipline, that is, through mastering the tools and skills by which the initial freedom may be realized at a higher level of significance. Logically, the teacher cannot be very much involved in either of the stages of freedom -- except, of course, by permitting

them to emerge. That leaves the stage of discipline. And I submit that it is precisely here, when the student is in the stage characterized by the mastering of the tools appropriate to the realization of the higher freedom, that the teacher's main tasks and functions are best defined.